

Schools in dark on funds to come

By Sam Farr

Monterey County Herald, Monterey, Calif.

March 21, 2009

Four weeks ago, Congress passed an economic stimulus package that throws a lifeline to our schools. But California's state laws and budget process have muddled the situation just when we desperately need clarity, and the lack of a plan from Sacramento to address this situation is not helping matters.

Our communities deserve to know how their federal formula money is being spent. Congress appropriated millions of dollars to our Central Coast school districts, yet no one seems to know where the new money will go.

By mid-April, California will receive two-thirds of its share of the State Fiscal Stabilization Fund, or about \$4 billion. Another \$2 billion will follow, almost all of which is dedicated to our schools. Another pot of money will send \$2.8 billion to California for special ed programs and disadvantaged students. The Central Coast alone will receive \$34 million for those programs, half this month and the rest by September.

This massive influx of education funds is intended to boost California's education budget to its 2006 level, helping compensate for the governor's cuts. All this begs the question: Why did 26,000 California teachers receive pink slips last week?

Schools are required by state law to notify teachers of potential layoffs by March 15. They're also required to inform teachers who will actually lose their jobs by May 15. Of course, both those arbitrary deadlines fall months before the state's budget is agreed upon and historically have very little link to actual staff cuts.

But even worse than the arbitrary nature of these deadlines is that they fail to take into consideration the \$9 billion the state will receive from the federal stimulus. I understand the state doesn't want to rely on money it hasn't yet received, and I realize the pink slip notices are

required by law. What I fail to grasp is the utter lack of context that accompanied the pink slips.

State officials know they will receive billions from Congress. They know that money can be devoted to teacher retention. But they fail to publicize their plans. It's time to make budget plans public and post them on the Internet, as Congress did with the Recovery Act.

We're all familiar with our state's budget woes, and we've heard plenty about how we got where we are today. We're hamstrung by a Constitution that demands an unrealistic two-thirds vote to agree on a budget. We face polarizing term limits that have gutted Sacramento's ability to raise revenues. And we rely too heavily on income taxes, which means we feel even more pain during economic downturns.

But those excuses won't help our students and they won't help our teachers.

It's hard to overestimate how important the federal stimulus funds are for our local schools. We know how many local teachers received pink slips, how many programs suffer from budget cuts and how the neediest students are too often left behind.

I hope our education leaders lay out clear plans for spending the new federal dollars and let us know how they plan to minimize staff cutbacks. I look forward to working with them to make sure this happens.

(Rep. Sam Farr, D-Carmel, represents the Central Coast in Congress.)